

# Preface to Professor Premasiri's Collection of Essays

## PREFACE

It is indeed a source of great pleasure to be called upon to write a forward to this collection of essays by Professor Premasiri. He is one among the distinguished luminaries in the field of Buddhist studies who have prestigiously passed through my hands. Throughout his academic career which I have watched with interest he has displayed a remarkable degree of honesty in his adherence to the authentic teachings of Theravada Buddhism via Canonical Pali literature. He is obviously not over-modernized in his interpretations of the Dhamma in order to be compatible with the thrusts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Buddhism as a remarkably sound system of human salvation sets out to salvage man from the underlying miseries of the very superficial arena of his mundane enjoyment in the world. This, it does, without recourse to the grace or benevolence of any external divine power, laying stress on the need of man to correct himself spiritually from within. It is emphatically referred to as *attano loko*, together with *anabhissaro*, in the Ratthapala Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya. This anthropocentric stress in the system of early Buddhist religious culture, with its graduated personal ascendance up the ladder of spiritual development, in marked contrast to that of the subsequent Mahayana, has impressed me as a student of the religion all my life, from the lay to the monastic.

This system of primary self-correction and self-development in Buddhism as a religion is what unmistakably goes under the name of *sila* and heralds the entire three-fold system of training called *sikkha* [*tisso sikkha*]. As a process of religious growth, *sila* works in a subtle combination with willed abstinence [or *veraman*] from all patterns of unwholesome human behavior through thought, word and deed [*cetayitva kammam karoti kayena vacaya manasa*]. Hence the very tools used in this process go under the name *veramani-sikkha-padam* or precepts which primarily bring about a culture of or a culture through abstinence.

This initial stage of culture is termed *sila*, i.e. the primary segment of moral goodness of man. It has to be remembered that *sila* is the indispensable basis on which the other two *sikkhas* of mind-culture and wisdom-development are to be founded [*sile patitthaya naro sapanno cittam pannan ca bhavayam*].

This immediately reminds us of the Buddhist reformatory process of *panca-sila* which corrects human behavior at the down-to-earth level of moral goodness. While the humans are left free to take upon themselves, of their own choice, this self-correction process [with the words *samadiyam*], the ruler of the Buddhist state, i.e. the *Raja Cakkavatti*, is expected to bring about its legal enforcement as in the statements *pano na hantabbo* etc. in the admonitions of the *Cakkavatti* to all his provincial rulers. This impresses on us with great clarity the role a sensible and honest ruler of a state should primarily play with regard to the enhancement of the moral goodness in the land. This is the basis on which the culture of Buddhism has necessarily to thrive, both for triumph in this life and for the final liberation in Nirvana. A social philosophy thus vibrantly enforced by the state and meaningfully accepted by the people becomes the unquestionable foundation for a totally successful religious life in Buddhism.

This position of unambiguous social upgrading via the aforesaid *panca-sila* is regularly maintained throughout Buddhist teachings. Read verses 245-7 in the Dhammapada which insist that he who cannot keep intact the injunctions of the *panca-sila* is liable to perish in this very life: *idh'eva eso lokasmim mulam khanati attano*. The Anguttara Nikaya does courageously state that he who cannot maintain the virtues of the *panca-sila* is a despicable social villain: *appahaya panca verani dussilo iti vuccati*. Respect for all forms of life, including that of animals, with which *panca-sila* begins, is now being sensibly held as a must in the world of scientific thinking, at least for the survival of man on earth.

After the World War II, the United Nations endeavored to establish globally, under Human Rights, the security of human life. But today, it is being proved a complete failure after the recurrent incidence of brutal massacres all over the world. In the face of this, they seem incompetent to act, perhaps on account of

their pre-conceived judgements on religious, ethnic and political ideological issues. On the second issue of human rights of security of property and possessions, the story is not very different. Invasions of countries and forced military occupation of undefended territories of others, on the basis of newly created theories of self determination prove the collapse of the ambitious aspirations of the United Nations.

Today there is a world-wide awakening about these areas of human well being. Over two and a half millennia ago Buddhism, seriously feeling the need to rectify errors in these areas of human behavior, deliberated extensively on them in Suttas like Singalovada, Parabhava, Vasala and Mangala. They severely chastise erratic behavior of man in areas like sexual gratification, domestic and social coherence, entertainment, and business transactions, indicating much needed correction and reform.

I must confess that while writing this forward from London where I am spending my *Vassana*, the Rains Retreat, I have not been able to read all the essays in this collection. From the few I have been able to glance through, I am convinced of the accuracy of what I have said above about Professor Premasiri. The text-based and well-argued presentations of Buddhist teachings on a vast range of themes as contained here would indeed be illuminating to many who seek the truths of Buddhism for the solution of human ills in the world. They would indeed supervise the research of many students of Buddhism, anywhere and everywhere. The essay on The Buddhist Analysis of the Nature of Social Conflict is indisputably outstanding.

May the brilliant scholarship of Professor Premasiri be a beacon of light to the serious students of Buddhism in the years to come.

Professor Dhammavihari / 03.09.06  
East London Buddhist Cultural Centre  
33 Maybury Road

London E 13 8 RZ